

North African church leaders elected Caecilian (in office 311-334) as the new bishop. Taking part in his consecration to office was Felix of Aptunga, reported to have been a "traditor". It was also true that Caecilian had not been a devotee of the "confessors" and "martyrs" and some of the African church took exception to his election on that line. The churches from Nubia, in particular, had most of their representation arrive after the election and they had a double cause for being miffed. These, with a few other churches, rebelled at the election of Caecilian and, finding in Majorinus a hard-line leader, elected him to office in what might be called a "rump" session in modern times. Caecilian had the ballots, however, and apart from these dissenters was duly recognized as bishop of Carthage.

Majorinus' party did not take this lightly and as the church became legal in 313, it appealed to the emperor for a judgment. The emperor responded with the concept of a council and this was convened at Arles (France) in 314. The gathering was widely attended and had the imperial favor. But the decision went against Majorinus and he and his friends were told to fall into line or be disfellowshipped. They chose the latter. The followers of Majorinus were declared in error and removed from office in the church.

In 316, on the death of Majorinus, the group came under the leadership of Donatus the Great (335). A persuasive leader, he saw the movement grow and spread in North Africa. But the Donatists were denied all state privileges, suffered some persecution from crusading Christian rulers, and felt the general harassment that is accorded dissenters. They did expand their claims to the point of hailing themselves as the only true church and denying salvation to those in the other bodies. Eventually they would diminish and lose their vibrant leadership. In the next century they would be sharply countered by Augustine and in time the Islamic invasions would silence their work and churches forever.

A number of lessons may be learned from these divisions and probably the one that is most gripping is the simple truth that polarizatin of opinion is the quickest way to divide and is an almost impossible tragedy for overcoming. Keeping a link of communication open, without sacrificing truth, is a very needed step in meeting any problem.